

Yemen: Fragile lives in hungry times

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Sana'a market place. © Ashley Jonathan Clements/Oxfam

Widespread hunger and chronic malnutrition have taken hold in Yemen. A protracted political stalemate over much of the past six months has left the government in paralysis, prompting a fuel crisis that has brought the economy to the verge of collapse. A recent study by Oxfam found many communities to be on the brink of disaster. In other parts of the country the United Nations has found that some vulnerable communities are now facing critical levels of malnutrition.

Donors remain deeply divided over their approaches to the region's poorest country, thus delaying responses and hindering funding. Hundreds of millions of dollars in assistance have been suspended. As the crisis builds, however, inaction is no longer an option. Interventions that address both immediate humanitarian needs and longer-term structural concerns must be urgently scaled up.

Summary

The promise of what came to be known as the Arab Spring, which dawned in North Africa, sweeping into the Arabian Gulf and up through the Middle East, has foundered in Yemen. Political turmoil has taken hold and reform has stalled, sparking renewed insecurity, devastating an already frail economy, and triggering a national fuel crisis that has in turn driven rising levels of hunger. Levels of child malnutrition in some regions are among the worst in the world.¹ While billions of dollars have been donated to Tunisia, Libya, and to a lesser extent Egypt to rebuild their economies, Yemenis are facing chronic hunger and have few resources at their disposal. While the eyes of the world are on other countries experiencing major upheaval, Yemen must not be forgotten. Leaving the country to simmer and collapse in slow motion will lead to far greater humanitarian and security concerns.

A recent Oxfam study in the western coastal governorate of al Hodeida found families to be coping – but only just. Many respondents faced unemployment or reduced working hours and lower pay. Families were close to breaking point. Nearly a fifth of those surveyed had put their children to work after withdrawing them from school, and nearly two-thirds were skipping meals. Other households were selling off items of value in order to buy food.

This is not just a short-term emergency. Well before the current crisis, a third of Yemenis – 7.5 million people – did not have enough to eat. Rising food prices, declining oil revenues, global financial instability, conflict, and one of the world's fastest-growing populations have all contributed to Yemen's worsening development indicators. The country is almost entirely reliant on imports to meet demand for staple goods and is consequently highly vulnerable to exchange rate fluctuations, food price shocks, and export bans. Compounding this are Yemen's high levels of poverty, mass unemployment, and social and gender inequalities.

The situation is only set to worsen in the coming years: oil, which accounts for two-thirds of government revenue, is fast running out – as is water. With no permanent rivers, and groundwater being used up at an unsustainable rate, Sana'a may become the modern world's first completely dry capital.

Funding shortfalls and capacity constraints have hampered aid operations, leading to underfunded programmes and breaks in the food pipeline supporting hundreds of thousands of people displaced by conflict. Over recent months some donors including the US, ECHO and UK, have commendably scaled up their humanitarian operations in response to the worsening situation. However, the current UN-administered emergency appeal for Yemen remains only half-funded. Increased investment in humanitarian aid is therefore urgently needed to enable agencies to scale up their life-saving programmes.

There are a myriad of reasons why donors have found it difficult to provide funds in this complex and fluid environment. Even the Friends of Yemen – a group of donors concerned for Yemen’s future, including the US and European and Gulf states – has not met since the current crisis began. Many donors remain divided over the right approach, citing insecurity in the country or the lack of a political settlement. A settlement has continued to prove elusive, but this does not excuse the lack of immediate action.

Undeniably, genuine obstacles hamper the operations of donors and NGOs alike, among them corruption, limited channels for absorbing funds, growing insecurity, and serious human rights violations. Such challenges have already led to a handful of donors, including the World Bank, withholding support for the country. Yet despite these frustrations, there are creative and practical ways of tackling Yemen’s problems. Some approaches may not yet have been adopted in the country, but have been tried and tested in other fragile and insecure contexts and could point the way to new and innovative approaches to the delivery of aid in Yemen.

Additionally, a national food strategy already exists and provides some of the groundwork for a unified response. However, more work is needed to adequately reflect the critical role of women in addressing hunger in Yemen, and to respond to the urgency of the hunger crisis facing the country. This strategy, which should form the cornerstone of Yemen’s food security approaches, has regrettably not been put into action in the current context of political instability.

New and improved programmes should be adopted in Yemen which build on traditional food distribution channels, in particular the use of cash and voucher programmes. Increasing support to small-scale farmers – particularly women – and investing in social protection will go some way towards addressing hunger in the country. Alongside these programmes, renewed efforts are needed to address Yemen’s chronic water scarcity. Food price monitoring systems should also be established. Given Yemen’s dependence on imported food, concrete commitments should also be made to tackle the causes of global food price volatility and reform the dysfunctional commodities markets.

Not only are new funds needed but donors should become more predictable with their funding and should trial new methods for delivering aid. No longer should politics and security be the drivers of aid strategies in Yemen. The time for the international community to act is now. It must tackle Yemen’s growing humanitarian needs and stem the tide that is sweeping the country towards calamity.

Recommendations

The Friends of Yemen should:

- **Urgently reconvene** to co-ordinate support for Yemen.
- Ensure that there is an **adequate and timely humanitarian response that meets the urgent needs of Yemeni women, men, and children**. The Friends of Yemen should address aid funding shortfalls, in particular in the UN-administered Humanitarian Response Plan and Emergency Response Fund, and in the World Food Programme (WFP)'s Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation and its Emergency Safety Net. New funds must also be rapidly made available to NGOs and UN agencies in support of longer-term food security, nutrition, and related interventions. These should be aligned with the National Food Security Strategy (NFSS), as far as possible.
- **Ensure that funding is flexible, predictable, impartial, and in accordance with humanitarian principles**. In keeping with commitments to Good Humanitarian Donorship, donors should provide flexible funding and be willing to transfer budgets between development and humanitarian streams, as conditions dictate. Those Friends who have already disengaged from Yemen should consider unfreezing their aid or re-channelling their support into humanitarian programmes; they should not turn their backs on Yemen in its time of need. Donors should also ensure that their strategies and aid programmes are driven by humanitarian concerns and not motivated or made conditional on regime change or narrow security goals.
- **Scale up technical and financial assistance to enable the continuation and expansion of existing social protection and welfare programmes**, such as the Social Welfare Fund (SWF) and the Social Fund for Development (SFD). In particular, donors should seek ways to strengthen the SWF's role in reducing hunger among vulnerable groups, for example by increasing support to the most vulnerable categories and by putting in place rigorous monitoring systems.

The international community should:

- As an urgent priority, **take steps to address the inequalities that prejudice the global food system** against poor, small-scale producers and vulnerable families in Yemen and elsewhere. Concrete commitments should be made at the G20 and the Committee on World Food Security to ensure full transparency and appropriate regulation of physical and financial markets, including regulation of the ability of governments to impose export bans when prices go up. The international community should also support the establishment of well-managed strategic grain reserves to reduce Yemen's susceptibility to shocks.

United Nations agencies and NGOs should:

- **Ensure that programmes are better informed, more aligned, and more integrated between agencies and sectors**, in order to both meet the food gap and address longer-term food security and nutrition. As is currently planned, a nationwide food security monitoring system should be established under the leadership of the WFP to better track hunger in Yemen, enabling better-informed and more appropriate programmes.
- **Adopt innovative approaches and trial methods that have worked elsewhere to complement or supplement food aid programmes**, through support for small-scale producers – particularly women – to enhance their productivity and profitability and their ability to cope with shocks such as food price fluctuations and climate events. Household and community-level stocks could be established as a buffer from such shocks, and subsidies and tax incentives could be used to strengthen production. New structures such as ‘consumer committees’ could be trialed in order to help monitor prices and inform food policy. The use of vouchers and cash programmes should be encouraged, where possible, to strengthen local markets. The private sector could also be seen as a means of delivering aid.

Yemeni authorities should urgently commit to the following:

- **Immediately put into action the most critical aspects of the National Food Security Strategy**, undertaking further planning and a costing of the strategy. Prioritising critical sectors through consultations with civil society, donors, and humanitarian agencies. In particular, water sector reform, the establishment of strategic food reserves, and the specific needs of women as both consumers and producers should be better addressed.
- **Facilitate access by aid agencies to women and men in need, and refrain from military actions which are damaging or disrupting infrastructure and services** that are critical for food transport, health services, and water and sanitation.
- **Strengthen national social protection systems, particularly in highly food-insecure governorates**. Opportunities should be explored, with the support of donors and civil society, to improve the impact of the Social Welfare Fund on highly food-insecure households, for example through the provision of more substantial handouts during times of hunger or linking benefits to food prices.

Descending into crisis

‘Now with this crisis I cannot work. My business has stopped. Sometimes I pray to die. Sometimes I think about committing suicide.’ – Samar, mother of six, Sana’a

At least one in three people go hungry each day in Yemen, with many more struggling to get by. Recent studies have found that children are being withdrawn from school to help pay rising costs, and many households are now without jobs, edging ever closer to disaster. Young children in parts of the country are facing some of the world’s worst levels of hunger and malnutrition.

Oxfam cautioned in November 2010 that Yemen was at risk of descending into a major food crisis unless urgent action was taken.² Nearly a year on, aid agencies are struggling to co-ordinate amongst themselves and donors remain divided over how best to intervene, thus impeding a concerted response. Resources are also scarce for the troubled country, with the UN-administered Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan (YHRP) at just 55 per cent of required funding for 2011. Billions of dollars in aid have been pledged to Tunisia, Libya, and to a lesser extent Egypt. Yet for Yemen – the region’s poorest country – development aid is being suspended by many donors, such as the EU, but is not being replaced with the necessary humanitarian assistance to meet the increasing needs.

Unrest inflames hunger

‘Our limited income cannot cover the expenses of daily life, particularly after the increased food prices,’ Sara, a widow from Sana’a, told Oxfam. Sara is suffering the impacts of protracted political turmoil that sparked a fuel crisis in June 2011, which in turn is proving to be a major driver of hunger. Fuel is critical in Yemeni society not only to transport and cook food, but also to pump water used to irrigate crops.

The nationwide fuel crisis followed the cutting of a major oil pipeline out of Marib,³ which halved domestic production, resulting in fuel scarcity and spiralling prices. Fuel prices rose to more than 500 per cent of pre-crisis levels,⁴ prompting rapid inflation, damaging livelihoods and industry, and leading to significantly reduced availability and affordability of food, particularly in rural areas. Under the weight of the political impasse, the fuel crisis, and rapidly diminishing central reserves, Yemen’s economy is edging towards collapse.

‘This crisis is too much: no work, high prices,’ Oxfam was told by Nada, who lives with her six children in Yemen’s capital, Sana’a. Shopkeepers have been forced to limit credit. ‘As a trader I have to pay to get goods,’ said Sameer, a trader in Sana’a, ‘so recently I’ve had to stop giving credit.’

On the brink

Samar, in her early thirties, lives in a poor neighbourhood of Sana'a with her husband and six children. Her husband is ill and cannot work, so she works as a seamstress and housemaid to help make ends meet. The family receives support from the government-run SWF amounting to YER 12,000 (\$51) every three months. But even with this help, Samar and her family find it hard to cover the expenses of daily life, such as rent, food, and medication.

'Before [the current crisis], my kids had breakfast every morning,' says Samar, 'but now they have to wait until noon to have their first meal. They have only two meals a day: lunch of only rice, and dinner when I bake bread.' Even the cost of cooking gas is becoming too much for the large family, as is the price of water.

As the political crisis worsened in Yemen, work dried up for Samar and her business faltered. 'During the crisis we slept without eating,' she says. 'Sometimes I pray to die. Sometimes I think about committing suicide. Then I pray to remove such thoughts from my head. I just get concerned for my daughters and my youngest son.'

Worsening conditions

In July 2011 Oxfam conducted an assessment in al Hodeida governorate in western Yemen, exploring the impact of the current crisis on the livelihoods of vulnerable Yemenis. The study found that the communities surveyed were on the brink of disaster. Jobs and incomes had been hit hard, making food difficult to afford. A fifth (20 per cent) of respondents had lost their jobs without finding new ones and more than half (52 per cent) of those interviewed were facing decreased incomes compared with the previous six months.

During the peak of the fuel shortages in June 2011, drivers were forced to queue for up to five days to refuel their vehicles, losing days of earnings. Many day labourers were faced with unemployment as farm owners could no longer afford to irrigate their fields. Fishermen were unable to refuel their boats, skilled workers in urban areas were laid off because of a lack of electricity, and government employees went without pay. Additionally, many households faced difficulties irrigating their crops due to the high price of the diesel needed to fuel groundwater pumps; this reduced food production and increased their vulnerability.

Since the beginning of the year, food prices in al Hodeida governorate have increased by as much as 60 per cent (see Table 1), while the political turmoil has meant that household incomes have fallen. To put this into context, the price of a monthly food basket of rice, bread, vegetables, and oil is around YER 14,000 (\$60).

Table 1: Food price increases in al Hodeida

	Urban			Rural		
Food	Early 2011	July 2011	Increase	Early 2011	July 2011	Increase
Wheat (per kg)	76	116	53%	96	130	15%
Oil (per litre)	275	350	27%	290	390	34%
Sugar (per kg)	180	264	47%	190	300	58%
Rice (per kg)	110	150	36%	125	200	60%

Prices are in Yemeni rial. Data gathered by Oxfam GB, July 2011

In addition to increased prices in both rural and urban areas, many items were no longer available at the peak of the crisis. Weeks would go by during which cooking gas and petrol were virtually unobtainable for all but the wealthiest.

Afraid for the future

While families in al Hodeida appear to be largely coping for the moment, they are quickly exhausting their strategies for dealing with the crisis. And there are regions of the country facing even greater pressures. 'It's natural to be afraid of the future. The security situation is deteriorating along with our standard of living. Today we have food. Tomorrow maybe not,' says Samira, a mother of eight and sole breadwinner, from al Hodeida.

Like Samira's family, nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of households interviewed had resorted to skipping meals to get by and nearly one-third (29 per cent) had borrowed money to survive.

A fifth of families (19 per cent) also admitted to withdrawing children from school to find employment to help pay the household expenses. On average, respondents had reduced household food stocks from one month to less than two weeks. Soon households will begin to exhaust these coping strategies and will fall into crisis.

Driving hunger

The political turmoil and economic shocks which have wracked the country in recent years, driving widespread hunger, are set against a backdrop of acute resource shortages and structural vulnerabilities.

Only 3 per cent of land in Yemen is arable, with much of that given over to non-food production.⁵ So severe is water scarcity that some analysts estimate reserves will run dry within seven years, leading to suggestions that the capital Sana'a will have to be abandoned. Some observers believe that Yemen can only sustain around a third of its current population, yet the population continues to grow at one of the

world's fastest rates – around 3 per cent each year – compounding the country's severe resource scarcity.

A series of conflicts and general insecurity have aggravated hunger and malnutrition. Hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people have been displaced by fighting, leaving them at risk. Damage to infrastructure threatens people's health, and limited access by humanitarian actors to conflict-affected governorates has meant that assistance cannot reach all those in need. These factors combined mean that a third of Yemenis go hungry and the country endures the world's third highest rate of malnutrition. Considerably more than half (58 per cent) of all Yemeni children suffer stunted growth, with a third (35 per cent)⁶ being severely stunted.

Triple crisis: food, fuel, and financial

Yemen is almost entirely reliant on imports to meet demand for staple goods and is consequently highly vulnerable to exchange rate fluctuations, food price shocks, and export bans – 90 per cent of wheat and all the rice consumed domestically is imported.⁷ Yemen was thus one of the countries most affected by the global food price crisis of 2008.⁸ A fuel crisis that began during the same period also played havoc with its economy, which relies on oil derivatives for over 90 per cent of its exports.⁹

Yemen pays the price of Russia's wheat ban

Following severe drought and fires during 2010, which devastated summer harvests, Russia imposed a ban on grain exports, which lasted until mid-2011. This trade prohibition has proved to be a poor strategy for managing prices either at home or abroad. Countries such as Yemen relied heavily on Russia for grain but were forced to pay new, higher global prices following the export ban. By instigating this ban, Russia also fostered an environment in which price spikes and market instability are more likely in the future.¹⁰

Before it could recover from these food and fuel shocks, Yemen's troubles were compounded by the global financial downturn, which shrank remittances and depressed oil revenues, hitting poor people in rural areas the hardest. 'Twenty years ago we were able to live off agriculture,' Yasser, a farmer from eastern Hadramawt, told Oxfam. However, pressures over recent years have undermined the ability of rural households to support their own food needs.

Running out

These threats are only set to worsen. With more than two-thirds of government revenue derived from rapidly diminishing oil reserves,¹¹ Yemen is predicted to become a net importer of oil within four years.¹² As this critical source of income dries up, its currency, the rial, will be put under further pressure, threatening unchecked inflation, soaring food prices, and significantly reduced government budgets – all of which will exacerbate hunger.

Oil is not the only resource running out. Water is drying up too, threatening to make Yemen the world's first country to run dry. Yemen has no permanent rivers and very few weeks of rainfall each

year. It therefore relies almost entirely upon underground water reserves, which are being used up far more quickly than they can be replenished.

Agricultural production accounts for over 90 per cent of water use,¹³ with most water sourced from poorly regulated groundwater wells using subsidised diesel to power pumps. Most of this water is used to irrigate qat¹⁴ – a water-intensive crop whose leaves are chewed as a mild narcotic – rather than producing foodstuffs. Sana'a may run dry in the next decade, making it the first capital of the modern world to run out of water.¹⁵

So severe is the situation that at least 4,000 people each year (probably a dramatic underestimation) are killed over land and water disputes – four times the number killed in criminal homicides.¹⁶ But Yemen's water crisis is only set to worsen as climate change brings more extreme weather patterns and more frequent drought, further exacerbating the suffering of food-insecure families.

The depletion of vital resources such as water and oil, and the devastating impact of the country's reliance on food imports, lead to a sobering but inescapable conclusion: whatever approaches are taken to ensure that poor Yemeni families can feed themselves in the short term, the international community and Yemeni authorities need to urgently plan for an entirely new strategy for the country's longer-term development, stability, and, indeed, survival.

Women's added burden

Yemeni women experience the greatest levels of sexual discrimination in the world, according to a global study on the gender gap.¹⁷ Child marriage, violence against women, and discriminatory laws are just some of the burdens faced by Yemeni women and girls.

This gender imbalance also applies in terms of hunger and malnutrition, with women suffering disproportionately. When food is scarce, women eat last and least. When food becomes too expensive, girls are often the first to be pulled out of school. Men tend to be more mobile and often eat out in restaurants, leading to a disparity in the quality of food to which women and men have access. One-quarter of Yemeni women between the ages of 15 and 49 are consequently acutely malnourished,¹⁸ and are therefore at increased risk of giving birth to malnourished babies.¹⁹

As in much of the world, women in Yemen are responsible for the majority of food production, despite having restricted access to markets, land, and credit. As a result of discrimination, women food producers have been systematically undervalued and ignored – by their own communities, by governments, and by donor agencies and some NGOs. Women are disproportionately represented among those suffering from hunger and malnutrition, but national and international food security initiatives have tended to view them as mothers and caregivers or perhaps as beneficiaries – rarely as food producers or agents of change.

Women also have primary responsibility for food preparation, and will be particularly hard hit as changing climatic conditions increase their burden in rural households. This will add to the time women

and girls spend collecting food, fuel, and water, and will reduce their opportunities to participate in education or income generation.

Investing in women's education and health and in their economic and political participation is clearly an avenue for improving economic development, reducing household food insecurity, and improving the nutritional status of vulnerable families. Strategies for achieving food security must address the specific needs of women producers, ensuring that they have equal access to resources and influence over how these resources are managed.

Obstacles to impact

While many donors are poised to donate, their eagerness to do so has been hampered by a range of obstacles. Both humanitarian agencies and donors have faced problems such as insecurity, limited channels for aid disbursement, limited data, and poor government leadership. This has led to the underfunding of existing programmes, but it is possible to overcome these challenges to some degree. To do so requires innovation and the adoption of new approaches to delivering aid in Yemen.

Aid channels

Donors have been concerned by a limited capacity to absorb additional aid and by widespread corruption in Yemen, helping to justify a lack of investment in the country. While there are real issues around capacity and corruption, this is not unique to Yemen and has been addressed in similar contexts. Furthermore, aid channelled through humanitarian programmes, while not immune to corruption, is far less prone to being siphoned off.

It is undeniable that some avenues for funding that had previously been open to donors, including some ministries, are not functioning. However critical structures such as the SWF and Social Fund for Development continue to support the poorest Yemenis. Other effective avenues for channelling aid also remain open and underfunded. The World Food Programme (WFP)'s Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO) and Emergency Safety Net (ESN) do not yet have sufficient funds to reach all intended beneficiaries. Similarly, the UN-administered Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan (YHRP) and Emergency Response Fund (ERF) are also viable avenues for channelling aid and addressing hunger, as is investing directly in the work of civil society and NGOs. While effective channels for aid delivery remain open and underfunded, the claim that Yemen cannot absorb further aid funding is questionable.

Politics and security

A narrow view of security interests and the increasing 'stabilisation' agenda that has been adopted by some donors have meant that aid has become politicised. In recent years, the US has focused its aid on areas where Al Qaeda operate, but these are not the poorest areas of Yemen. Ironically, this politicisation threatens to further destabilise the situation and erodes public perceptions of the impartiality of humanitarian actors, placing them at higher risk.

In recent months some donors have tied aid to political change. The EU suggests that by activating a credible plan for transition, the government could unlock the potential for significant international assistance to Yemen. The current status quo shows few signs of changing, however, and aid can no longer be put off until the environment is more conducive to investment. Urgent support is needed now for vulnerable Yemeni women, men, and children, whether or not their government complies with outside demands.

In mid-2011, the Dutch government withdrew aid funding that had been channelled through the Yemeni government, in protest at the human rights situation. Oxfam encourages donors to seek alternative channels to direct their funding rather than disengaging from Yemen, so that poor people do not suffer – in particular humanitarian funding streams.

Lack of leadership

Yemeni authorities have long been unable to reach agreement over development priorities, much to the frustration of donors, and sustained leadership by the government on critical issues has been largely lacking. Yet donors could take a more proactive role in addressing food insecurity. Requests by the Yemeni government, for example, to focus on food security in a proposed Multi-Donor Trust Fund in early 2011 were rebuffed by most prospective donors, many of whom had alternative priorities of their own.

Similarly, no funding was made available for the implementation of the Yemeni government's National Food Security Strategy (NFSS),²⁰ despite technical support from the EU and others in penning the plan. With most ministries barely functioning, there is little prospect in the short term of government leadership on urgent issues such as food security. Greater unity and a more proactive role are therefore required on the part of donors and aid agencies alike.

Disparate visions

Donors and key agencies have sometimes found themselves with competing visions over how best to address the issues in Yemen, and this has hampered the emergence of a co-ordinated and unified response. Key donors and agencies have also been at odds over how best to tackle food security in the country, some believing that food aid is essential while others have rejected this approach. Some donors such as the UK believe that urgent action is required while others insist on continuing to gather data and to strategise.

Some have disputed the veracity of existing information concerning food security and nutrition, preferring to conduct further and sometimes costly assessments before supporting humanitarian interventions. While there is undoubtedly a need for more and better information, existing data is sufficient to demonstrate the existence of severe and growing food insecurity in Yemen. More recent surveys, including Oxfam's own research, illustrate the worsening situation in recent months.²¹

Gulf donors, in particular, have been keen to fund large-scale infrastructure projects. The government did not have the administrative capacity to receive aid for the more complex projects.

Making aid work

'For Yemen's sake, we must not take the risk of doing nothing ... We've got to try to secure Yemen's future before it's too late.' – Alan Duncan, UK Minister for International Development, speaking at Chatham House, November 2010

Genuine opportunities do exist for donors and humanitarian agencies to make a difference in Yemen, despite the array of obstacles. Through the generous support of donors like DFID, the EU, and USAID, the situation of food insecurity and malnutrition has begun to be addressed, but more must be done urgently.

To achieve genuine and lasting progress on this issue, a combination of immediate actions is needed that address the humanitarian needs of acutely vulnerable communities, as well as broader interventions that tackle the systems and structures that exacerbate hunger in Yemen. The NFSS sets out a timetable to make the country food-secure within ten years, and it is critical that this is used to frame longer-term donor interventions.

Swift action

While the political stalemate has caused many donors to pause, this is the time when it is most critical to act. The continuing chaos could take months or even years to stabilise, but Yemen does not have the luxury of waiting, as the food crisis grows ever more severe. The international community should make concerted, timely, appropriate, and principled interventions of the nature outlined below.

Scale up what works

The establishment of a transition fund has recently been proposed for Yemen, which would allow agencies to scale up their interventions in key sectors such as food security and nutrition. While Oxfam emphatically supports the objective of such a fund, concerns remain that this is a mechanism that would lack transparency and would be slow to be established and costly to administer. Viable mechanisms do already exist for significantly scaling up activities and funding, and these should be supported as a priority.

One such example is the UN-administered appeal for Yemen (the YHRP), which is currently just over half-funded for 2011 (at 57 per cent),²² with key sectors still in need of increased donations. This mechanism has the advantages of already being well established and of having many existing projects linked to it. Despite the current funding shortfall, donors have started to wake up to the severity of the food crisis in Yemen. Food and agriculture is the best-funded sector within the YHRP at two-thirds (66 per cent) of required funds.²³ Similarly, the Emergency Response Fund (ERF), also administered by the UN, offers a rapid and flexible mechanism for responding to unmet and emerging humanitarian needs. But this too is in need of increased funding, prompting the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian

tarian Affairs to state in its latest situation report, '[The ERF] is depleting fast and needs to be replenished.'²⁴

The WFP is currently facing a shortfall of nearly \$60m, around a third of its overall annual budget in Yemen.²⁵ The agency's budget deficit has restricted its ability to implement its Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation and its Emergency Safety Net, thus impairing its ability to meet the vast hunger gap in the country. Currently, the WFP is able to implement its safety net in only seven of the planned 14 most food-insecure governorates due to this funding shortfall, leaving 700,000 women, men, and children without the support that had been planned for.²⁶ Budget constraints have also led to a break in the food pipeline, Oxfam was told by WFP, meaning that food rations to vulnerable communities displaced by conflict in Sa'ada have been cut regularly since 2010.

Strengthen social protection and make it work for women

As part of a national welfare scheme that includes the Social Fund for Development (SFD) and the Public Works Programme, the Social Welfare Fund (SWF) focuses on cash transfers to the most vulnerable households in the country. However, many donors remain sceptical regarding the fund's level of impact. Donors have rightly taken issue with concerns around targeting,²⁷ a lack of monitoring, and the small size of payments made through the fund.²⁸ Yet these challenges can be largely overcome.

The priority at this time, given immense needs and limited resources, is a deepening of targeted support through the SWF and not simply an expansion of the numbers of recipients. Benefits to the most vulnerable people could be increased in highly food-insecure governorates during the hunger season,²⁹ or the value of cash transfers could be index-linked to food price movements so that rising prices do not put food out of reach of vulnerable households.

A system should also be put in place by the fund for regularly reviewing the eligibility of those on its lists to ensure improved targeting and to include newly vulnerable households, thus improving efficiency and impact while allaying donor fears. Creative options should be explored for monitoring the impact of the SWF alongside technical support – through, for example, involving civil society organisations (CSOs), which could offer invaluable insight into the successes and failures of the system, allowing donors to better tailor their support.

Not only have SWF lists proved crucial for agencies such as the WFP to target vulnerable households, but cash transfers can directly reduce hunger and smooth food consumption during difficult times by protecting savings and food stores.³⁰ Donors should therefore explore avenues for strengthening the SWF rather than turning their backs, as some have begun to do. As a last resort, donors who remain unable to support the SWF should look to re-channel their funds within Yemen rather than withdraw entirely from the country.

Reaching those in need

Restricted access by humanitarian actors to populations in need has been a common challenge faced by operational agencies and donors

over recent years, particularly in the north, though more recently also in the south of the country. Limited humanitarian access has prevented adequate assessments and has hampered regular assistance and monitoring, further jeopardising the lives and well-being of vulnerable people affected by conflict and hunger.

With a mounting crisis and growing insecurity across much of the country, it is imperative that civilian, military, and tribal actors should work to facilitate unimpeded humanitarian access. It is also vitally important that all care is taken by combatants not to damage or disrupt infrastructure and services that are critical for food transport, health services, and water and sanitation, for the sake of vulnerable women, men, and children caught up in conflict.

Promote alternatives to food aid

While traditional food aid has proved successful in parts of Yemen – in particular, in areas of mass displacement or limited food availability – alternative and innovative interventions should also be considered. The use of cash or voucher schemes, where there is sufficient food available, can strengthen local markets and traders, while bolstering household food security. Rigorous methods will be needed to minimise corruption, but such programmes have proved successful in other countries suffering from high levels of corruption and can work in Yemen also. Timely and adequate humanitarian interventions should also be geared towards protecting and quickly restoring livelihoods in areas that are not yet facing crisis, in order to stop the slide into destitution and debt that makes recovery and building resilience harder.

In the medium term, sustainable household-level and urban food production needs greater support. With only one in ten Yemenis producing a surplus of food, urgent attention is needed to enhance domestic production of staples. Investing in small-scale producers and protecting their rights to land and other natural resources will go some way towards addressing the underlying vulnerability and chronic marginalisation of those worst hit by the current crisis. But given the unique range of resource constraints facing Yemen, this will solve only part of the problem.

Communities should be supported to cope with changing climatic conditions and other shocks through, for example, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate adaptation programmes. The establishment of co-operatives to enhance the power of farmers in terms of pricing could be facilitated by aid agencies, civil society, and local government structures. Education around crop cycles, water conservation, access to markets, and diversification practices could also be promoted to enhance the profitability of local producers.

Opportunities for moving farmers away from qat production and towards food crops should be explored, with the aim of improving the ability of farmers to feed themselves and reduce the strain on limited water resources that the crop's intensive irrigation demands. Initiatives to replace qat production should be undertaken cautiously, however, as it remains a critical source of rural employment and a major route through which wealth is transferred from urban to rural

areas. Tackling qat production without ensuring viable and profitable alternative livelihoods could worsen hunger amongst poor families.

Crucially, women must be at the heart of any solution to comprehensively address food insecurity. Despite performing three-quarters of cultivation activities and four-fifths of the work related to livestock, women in Yemen rarely own either land or livestock.³¹ Women should be empowered as producers through more equitable ownership of land and access to credit.

While a nationwide food monitoring system must be established – as is currently planned by the WFP – a complement could consist of ‘consumer committees’, which would monitor food price fluctuations to track trends and serve as an early warning system for humanitarian actors. Given Yemen’s dependence on imported food, concrete commitments from the international community to tackle the causes of global food price volatility and to make dysfunctional commodities markets work are also crucial.

Awareness-raising and food and nutrition education could also serve to improve the types of food grown and purchased by vulnerable families. Complemented by hygiene and water and sanitation awareness, the rising levels of malnutrition in certain communities could be reversed. Women are integral to transforming household consumption and hygiene practices and the nutritional status of their families, and must therefore also be central to any such activities.

However, none of this is possible unless resource scarcity is addressed. A further priority should include water sector reform. Without sufficient steps to better manage water scarcity, groundwater will be depleted by excessive and inefficient irrigation of thirsty cash crops, jeopardising food production, increasing the country’s reliance on food imports, and exacerbating conflict. Here, the national plan for food security can help guide action.

Learning from other contexts

Yemen clearly presents a challenging set of impediments for donors and aid agencies, but many of these obstacles are not unique to the country. Many agencies have already adopted approaches in similar countries, such as remote management of programmes from outside Yemen, and local partnerships to ensure that aid gets through to the most vulnerable people.

In other countries that share some of the same characteristics as Yemen – such as a volatile security situation, high levels of corruption, widespread malnutrition and hunger, and poor, hard-to-reach rural communities – programmes have been successfully put in place. In some of the most insecure areas of Mali and Niger, for instance, local traders were used to deliver cash grants to vulnerable communities. These traders were still able to travel and make a living, and once monitoring and accountability mechanisms were put in place, the programme successfully provided cash to women and men in need.

Such examples illustrate how aid can get through, even in highly complex, challenging, and insecure environments. The use of the private sector is often an effective approach, as companies may already know how to function safely and effectively amidst insecurity.

Donors may need to think further outside the box in order to get support to those in need. Banks, post offices, mobile phone companies, remittance and money transfer companies, and microfinance institutions are just some of the options open. There is a need to explore ways to reach newly vulnerable families, for example through the use of Zakat³² lists, and community committees could be essential for verifying such lists and monitoring project impact.

Follow the plan

The NFSS could provide a framework for both the government and donors to comprehensively address hunger in Yemen. The strategy aspires to reduce food insecurity by one-third over the next five years through a combination of trade and agricultural policies, economic reforms, population growth control, and water sector reforms. The comprehensive plan ambitiously lays the foundations for making nine out of ten Yemenis food-secure within ten years, while reducing child malnutrition by one percentage point each year.

No prioritisation of the plan's key components has been made, however, and its implementation has not been costed. Donors have therefore been unable to fund the strategy's roadmap, and virtually no progress has been made in realising its ambitious vision. This marks a real opportunity for positive engagement: if sufficient energy could be found to align donor interests with the NFSS, trends towards growing hunger and malnutrition could be reversed.

A first step towards implementing the plan could be to consult with and better involve local NGOs or civil society in refining it to make it even more relevant today. When the strategy was drafted, a fertile ground of potential solutions was overlooked by not including civil society and largely failing to recognise women's critical role in reducing household food insecurity.

Hunger in Yemen has significantly worsened today compared with the time at which the NFSS was first drawn up during 2010. The plan therefore fails to reflect the full urgency of the crisis. Furthermore, with key ministries no longer operational and much of the regime in paralysis, there is unlikely to be significant leadership or support from the Government of Yemen in the immediate future. Even in the government's absence, however, the NFSS can still offer a unified vision under which donors, humanitarian agencies, and civil society can work together in addressing food insecurity.

Renewed engagement

Yemen has long been under-aided, with some of the world's lowest levels of assistance, despite being the poorest country in the region and among the world's least developed. From 2003 to 2008, only Bangladesh and Myanmar received less aid per person. The country has suffered from relative neglect by international donors. What little aid it has received has often been ineffectively targeted and has failed to reach vulnerable Yemenis.

Renewed donor engagement is critical to securing Yemen's future and the future of millions of vulnerable women, men, and children. The recent scaling up of humanitarian activities by several key donors such as DFID, ECHO, and USAID in the country is welcome. Yet the role that the international community has played over past years has been at best inconsistent and at worst has perpetuated some of Yemen's problems.

International initiatives

Early 2010 saw the establishment of the Friends of Yemen, a group of interested states consisting of key Western and Gulf countries, with the aim of supporting Yemen in tackling its core economic and political challenges. Yet Friends have not thus far realised their full potential. Promises to bolster social protection in Yemen have not been followed through and, since the start of the current political stalemate which perhaps poses the country's greatest challenge of recent times, Friends have failed to meet – presumably because they are awaiting a political resolution. The potential of the Friends of Yemen to contribute to alleviating the current crisis is enormous, and the group should immediately reconvene to co-ordinate on how to support vulnerable Yemeni people.

Prior to the formation of the Friends of Yemen, a 2006 conference of the Yemen Consultative Group saw over \$5.5bn promised to support the country's development. This could deliver real change on the ground and tackle the growing hunger crisis. Yet to date, while more than half of these pledges have reportedly been released (58 per cent), as little as 10–20 per cent has actually been programmed.³³

Donor disengagement

Even as some donors, such as DFID, ECHO, and USAID, are scaling up their humanitarian interventions and others are poised with support, other institutions are retreating from the troubled country. In August 2011 the World Bank announced a freeze of its half-a-billion-dollar aid programme after nearly six months of suspension, due to concerns over security and governance. In mid-2011, the Netherlands suspended its support for all programmes with the Government of Yemen, including the Social Welfare Fund, citing human rights violations by government forces – though it continued its support to civil society. While efforts to promote human rights in Yemen are welcome, this move was unfortunately followed by the suspension of support for the SWF by all major donors.

Aid in Yemen is now undeniably more complex and more risky than in previous years. Decisions to disengage by donors from the country have certainly not been made lightly, and genuine obstacles impede their ability to continue support as before. Given the levels of need and the worsening conditions, however, Oxfam encourages donors not to turn their backs on Yemeni people in this time of need. Rather than disengaging entirely from the country, donors that find themselves unable to continue programmes as before should look to alternative modalities through which to channel their funding, such as those listed above.

The hope and clamour for reform sweeping across North Africa, the Gulf, and Middle East have struggled to have much impact in a country mired in worsening hunger, poverty, and unrest. Yet Yemen's youth remain optimistic that change is around the corner. If the country's friends are true, they will support other countries in the region that have been swept up in these climactic events without forgetting Yemen. They should commit to the immediate actions that are required to begin to comprehensively address hunger and malnutrition in the country.

For as long as Yemen's institutions are unable to provide strong leadership in addressing the symptoms and causes of the country's hunger crisis, the Friends of Yemen must take on this role making every effort to ensure local ownership and consultation. More aid is urgently needed today, rather than waiting for a political solution that may take months or even years to materialise. Those donors who are poised to donate should do so, but their support should be better targeted at meeting the needs of Yemen's poor people.

Yemen faces a perfect storm of challenges confronting its progress, which will require an equally comprehensive set of innovative solutions. Although it is critical that more and better aid is rolled out immediately, this alone will not be enough to end hunger. These solutions should be the first steps in a new, radical long-term strategy for a country whose vital natural resources are diminishing rapidly, threatening the sustainability of its economy and ultimately of the state itself.

Yemen's food security challenges reflect many of the features of the global food system that has given rise to two global food price crises in a few short years, pushing millions of people into poverty and hunger. To address this crisis, we need to see a shift in how food is produced, in how markets function, and in how we preserve and restore precious resources to ensure governance for a resilient food system where everyone on the planet always has enough to eat.³⁴

Despite decades of progress, globally the number of people going hungry is on the rise – more than one billion people now live in hunger.³⁵ Without steps to address the global inequalities in the systems through which our food is bought and sold, vulnerable Yemenis will continue to live and die in crisis.

Notes

- ¹ IRIN (2011) 'Violence threatens children's health', 18 August 2011.
- ² Ashley Clements (2010) 'Lives at Risk,' *The World Today*, Volume 66, Number 11, November 2010.
- ³ The pipeline was repaired but has since been attacked again, and it remains highly vulnerable to being cut.
- ⁴ OCHA (2011) 'Yemen Humanitarian Emergency Situation Report No. 5', 25 July 2011.
- ⁵ USAID (2010) 'Yemen Property Rights and Resource Governance Profile'.
- ⁶ Government of Yemen, National Food Security Strategy Paper, November 2010.
- ⁷ WFP (2010) 'Yemen Market Study'.
- ⁸ WFP (2008) 'Impact of Rising Food Prices on Household Food Security in Yemen', August 2008.
- ⁹ IFPRI (2010) 'Impacts of the Triple Global Crisis on Growth and Poverty in Yemen', February 2010.
- ¹⁰ Oxfam (2011) 'The Impact of Russia's 2010 Grain Export Ban', 28 June 2011.
- ¹¹ IFPRI (2010) op. cit.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ BBC (2008) 'Comic answer to Yemen water crisis', 4 September 2008.
- ¹⁵ CNN (2010) 'Qat crops threaten to drain Yemen dry', 2 December 2010.
- ¹⁶ Small Arms Survey (2010) 'Yemen Armed Violence Assessment, Issue Brief 2', October 2010.
- ¹⁷ World Economic Forum (2010) 'The Global Gender Gap Report'.
- ¹⁸ WFP (2010) 'Comprehensive Food Security Survey'.
- ¹⁹ UNICEF (2009) 'State of the World's Children'.
- ²⁰ The NFSS was drawn up in late 2010 with the assistance of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI).
- ²¹ Oxfam GB, Food Security Assessment, al Hodeida, July 2011.
- ²² OCHA, Financial Tracking System, as of 28 August 2011.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ OCHA (2011) 'Yemen Emergency Situation Report No. 7', 16 August 2011.
- ²⁵ Data provided to Oxfam by WFP.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Some recipient households receive benefits but were reassessed and found to be ineligible for support, while others were found to be eligible but not receiving support, according to discussions held between Oxfam, the SWF, and the World Bank.
- ²⁸ A maximum of YER 4,000 (\$18) per month for a large household, paid quarterly.
- ²⁹ The 'hunger season' is the period when harvest stocks are depleted, little food is available on the market, and prices rise.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ USAID (2010) 'Yemen Property Rights and Resource Governance Profile'.
- ³² The Zakat is charitable giving to the poor, as promoted by Islam.
- ³³ C. Murphy (2010) "'Recognition of urgency" at Yemeni aid forum', *The National*, 1 March 2010.
- ³⁴ Oxfam (2011) 'Growing a Better Future: Food justice in a resource-constrained world', and A. Evans (2011) 'Governance for a Resilient Food System', Oxfam Discussion Paper, both 31 May 2011.
- ³⁵ FAO (2009) 'One sixth of humanity undernourished – more than ever before', 19 June 2009.

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